

Ceramic Arts Daily Lesson Plan

A Three Stage Approach to Teaching Wheelthrowing

by Jake Allee

Stage 1: Readings and Visual Diagrams

This first category of learning methods, and the first stage in teaching throwing, is often ignored by the teacher because it takes work up front, and as educators we're already buried in paperwork! However, the extra time used for preparation pays off and the students will be quicker to meet you half way.

A worksheet designed to address all the critical points associated with habit forming for wheel throwing technique helps. I always begin by asking the students to read the worksheet through and I then present them with several questions to make sure they have read it. After that, I go over the content of the worksheet again, re-phrasing it with words that come more naturally.

Any worksheet that addresses frequently asked questions can be used as a reference point by the students and ultimately make your job easier. A worksheet never takes the place of a verbal explanation from the instructor or a practical demonstration, but it certainly gives the student something to think about when it's placed in their hands, even if they've walked into the classroom late. The worksheet always reinforces stages 2 and 3. Flying solo with a worksheet for one class might make a student think about showing up on time. Revisiting the handout prior to practical demonstration at the beginning of the next class will eliminate your feelings of guilt and give the late student a chance for redemption.

Stage 2: Practical Demonstration

After everyone has read the worksheet and I reinforce and explain it verbally, I move to stage 2. The students watch the practical demonstration while reference to the worksheet throughout the process. I slow way down and ask the students how I should be executing the technique according to the worksheet. I demonstrate all of the steps listed to further reinforce the information. At this time I

also talk about some of the "tricks" in my personal approach for success.

If I make a mistake in the process while demonstrating, we discuss what happened. I encourage the students to ask the following questions. *Why* did the mistake happen? *What* should have been done differently? *How* can the mistake be corrected? This shows students how to learn from the inevitable mistakes. They also refer to this experience of watching a demonstration, and the troubleshooting that occurred, when working on their own pieces, so it helps and influences them as they form their own habits. Lastly, it also puts them at ease with the expert imparting the knowledge.

The first piece I make for a demo is always destroyed at the end; this takes away the preciousness of the object created. I then take the opportunity to give my short talk on how each person in the class dictates what is considered their first piece on the wheel. Will it be the piece that becomes an ashtray, or will it be the piece that is kept after they understand the control required to make a thin wall and keep the piece centered? The viewer may never know if the maker's first piece was made on the very first day or at the end of the first year of practice.

Stage 3: Hands-on Experience

When I finally make it to Stage #3, everyone is ready to get started. I ask for one more exercise of patience on the student's part. Everyone goes through the steps of centering and opening simultaneously and no one moves to the next step until everyone is ready. Once everyone gets to the point of pulling up on the cylinder, they are all cut loose and begin to work on their own. At this point I walk around and address all of the students one-on-one, giving suggestions and helping with the challenges they encounter. The whole process takes me about an hour to go through from start to finish. I always start the next class with a review through practical demonstration and check that everyone has their worksheet with them for reference.

This approach may not work for all teachers, but the idea is to teach from as many angles as possible and use each angle to reference the other. Think about adapting this method to your particular way of teaching. Look at the effort Val Cushing has put into point #1—the achievement of his students speaks of the value of his efforts.

To the students reading this, please use this information to pull knowledge from your teacher in a way that best fits your learning style, I'm sure he or she will direct you to a good resource even if there's no worksheet available. Remember, the classroom environment is a 50%–50% situation with regards to effort, requiring equal amounts from both student and teacher. Realizing this helps speed everyone to what really counts: *the content of the work*. Technique is only the path to content and work ethic will drive you down that path!

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Creating a Teaching Worksheet for Ceramics

- #1** Identify the basic steps in the technical process. Double check the descriptive language used to convey these steps.
- #2** Develop drawings or high-contrast photographs as visual examples to accompany these steps. All diagrams should be clearly labeled and the images should photocopy well.
- #3** Identify and address frequently asked questions.
- #4** Leave the “tricks” out and let that be a point of interest with the practical demonstrations in step two.

Below: A two page resource on the basics of wheel throwing, available online at www.ceramicartsdaily.org/education.

Throwing on the Wheel

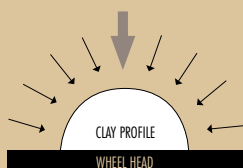
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TIPS FOR SUCCESS

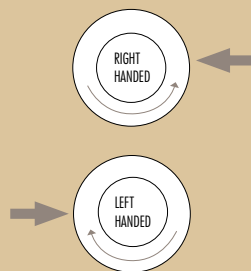
- ▶ Always apply and release pressure to the clay slowly.
- ▶ Never allow water to collect in the bottom of the piece.
- ▶ Slow the wheel down in each step of the process.
- ▶ Be persistent in your efforts.



Diagram illustrating hand to clay pressure.



Large arrow indicates hand to clay contact area when throwing. Small arrow indicates wheel direction.



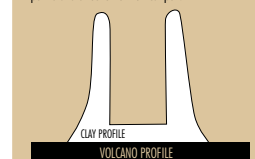
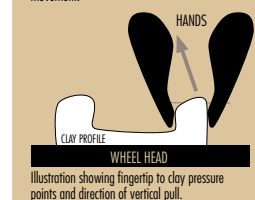
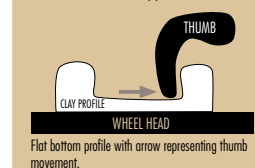
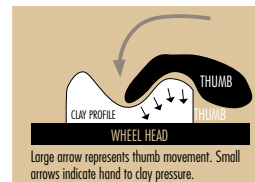
CENTERING THE CLAY

- ▶ Start with a well wedged ball of clay that's no larger than the size of your hands.
- ▶ Anchor your elbows to your knees for stability.
- ▶ Wet your hands and the clay.
- ▶ Slowly apply downward pressure equally to all sides of the clay until no movement exists within the mass.
- ▶ When the clay is “centered,” it will be spinning while your hands remain still.
- ▶ Once the clay is centered, relax and slowly pull your hands away.



OPENING UP THE CLAY

- ▶ Place the tip of your thumb in the center of the clay mass.
- ▶ Slowly roll your thumb into the center of the clay maintaining pressure on the clay profile.
- ▶ Stop ½ inch from the wheel head.
- ▶ To create a flat bottom, use the same hand position and pull straight back toward yourself.
- ▶ Any movement causing the piece to go out of “center” is reflected in the rest of the piece.



MAKING A PULL

- ▶ From this point on, manipulate the piece only at the 3 o'clock position relative to the wheel head (9 o'clock if left handed).
- ▶ Slowly apply and release pressure.
- ▶ Always use your fingertips when making a vertical pull and slow the wheel down.
- ▶ Position your inside finger slightly above the outside finger and apply pressure with the outside finger slowly moving your hands upward.
- ▶ When making a vertical pull, pull the clay inward to create the volcano shape.
- ▶ Repeat the pulling process until the wall is uniform in thickness from top to bottom.

